



Sullivan County House of Corrections is seen in this file photo.

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## Sullivan County: new jail, approach needed

◆**Bad numbers:** Study shows that 90 percent of female inmates, 77 of males re-offend.

By KRISTEN SENZ

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**UNITY** — The Sullivan County jail is less like punishment and more like “crime school,” said John Gramuglia, program director for the Sullivan County Department of Corrections.

“If you look at the recidivism rates, it’s obvious that sending offenders here is not a deterrent to crime. It’s just not,” Gramuglia said, “and that’s what I think the public doesn’t understand. It’s not a deterrent; it’s crime school. . . . This is an alumni meeting, here, that’s essentially

what it is.”

A recent study showed that 90 percent of female inmates in Sullivan County re-offend, as do 77 percent of male offenders.

“Those numbers are sky high, but they haven’t done any programming here previously, so it’s not a shock,” Gramuglia said.

The study, conducted by Ricci Greene Associates, also showed that more than 80 percent of the county jail’s inhabitants have

substance abuse problems.

“I’d say 50 percent of it, anecdotally, is heroin, and what’s changed over the years is the shame component. There used to be a shame component to being a junkie. That doesn’t exist anymore.”

Gramuglia joined the jail staff in October and has been working with Ross Cunningham, superintendent of the corrections

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department, and the county attorney's office to come up with a plan to overhaul the county's approach to sentencing.

The key, Cunningham says, is a continuum-of-care model that offers drug and alcohol rehabilitation, life skills education, family services and post-release programs. That's why he's proposing the construction of a \$4.2 million Community Corrections Center at the county complex in Unity.

"We're lobbying the judges now just to let them know where we're going and to gather support," Cunningham said.

The secure, 44-bed facility with dormitory-style rooms would contain a 90-day residential drug and alcohol treatment program with on-site clinicians and program facilitators that would keep inmates occupied all day with groups, classes and therapy sessions. Cunningham said the center would save the county money by limiting trips to treatment facilities in Keene and Bethlehem, where Sullivan County inmates are routinely transported.

Open only to low- and medium-security inmates, the center would also provide regular jail beds for female offenders, Cunningham said. It would also offer services to inmates' families during and after their release.

Critics have called Cunningham's approach easy on crime, but he defends the community corrections model as a realistic way to address the reasons people end up in jail in the first place.

"It's not always about popularity with me, it's about doing the right thing, and that's not always popular," he said.

Gramuglia said research supports the Community Corrections Center model as an effective way to fight the revolving-door effect that keeps offenders returning to jail and often lands their children there as well.

"Everything we're going to do is evidence-based; none of it is our own concoction," he said. "This may be new to New Hampshire, but this is not a new corrections technique nationally. This has been going on for a long time."

Ultimately, Cunningham said, the Community Corrections Center is designed to reduce the need for secure jail beds in Sullivan County, which cost taxpayers \$63.73 per day. He said beds at the Community Corrections Center would cost several dollars less per day.

Cunningham and Gramuglia have started on the path toward achieving their goals already with a construction trailer parked out-

side the jail. Cunningham uses \$150 out of the inmate commissary fund (revenue from inmate telephone calls) each month to pay for the trailer, which serves as a makeshift classroom for Gramuglia's inmate groups and classes.

In addition to the Community Corrections Center, Cunningham has proposed \$1.3 million in improvements to the existing jail, which was originally built in 1978. The infrastructure upgrades would create a safer and more efficient work environment for the staff, he said. A touch screen in the control center would replace the dozens of thick metal keys needed to travel through the facility. The sinks in the offender units would be motion-activated to avoid flooding and the showers would be timed for five-minute cycles. The recreation area would be resurfaced and made more secure. The roof would be replaced.

All the changes are designed to help the county's corrections department run more smoothly and help prisoners make a better transition from their cells back into society.

"Who do you want as your neighbor?" Gramuglia said. "That's what it comes down to, because most of these offenders are going to live back in this community."

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